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NICKLIN
And They Went to the War

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"And they went to the War"

**Poems by
J. A. NICKLIN**

London : SIDGWICK & JACKSON Ltd.

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“And they went to the War”

By J. A. NICKLIN

LONDON : SIDGWICK & JACKSON
LTD.

1914

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

NUNC DIMITTIS: a Book of
Poems. 2s. 6d. *net.*

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PROLOGUE.

When on his sleepless unrest the Reveille*
Breaks, with "bold bugles blowing points of
war,"

And he sees, in waking vision, bright Youth sally,
Through Destiny's door,

Forth to the tented field, and shining Honour,
Throned on the thundering heights' dread
majesty,

And *his* grey soul feels despair close upon her,
In misery

Of torpid blood and life's declining vigour,
Acknowledging with cold reluctant tears
The toll at last exacted in full rigour,
The toll of years,

And he has but a song to bring his brothers,
A dirge for those who in their young prime fall—
Is all his pity dedicate to those others?
Not all! Not all!

* Pronounced, *more militari*, "*Revally*."

I.—THE YOUNG SQUIRE.

“ Come saddle me the Iron Duke, you hear the
bugles call ;
My poor old mare, Brown Bess, must eat her head
off in the stall ;
It needs a charger stout for me, and not a poor old
mare,
To stand to fire, to trot all day, to spur and never
spare.

“ I thought that I should live and die a dull and
dreary drone,
With not a thing upon this earth I could wish to
make my own ;
Poor, pretty Kate, at Willow Farm, had kissed me
to despair,
My stately cousin smiled and smiled—what the devil
did I care ?

“ I could not bear to see the tombs of each knightly
ancestor,
Sir James who fell at Ascalon, Sir Piers at Agin-
court ;
They lay within the cold, black rails ; their cold,
impassive gaze,
Beneath the fretted ceiling, sneered at my inglorious
days.

“ But the call of battle stirs the blood no kiss could
ever thrill,
And the bounding pulses tell my heart that blood
is knightly still.
Farewell, farewell, till I can show such deeds as ye
have done,
Sir Piers who fell at Agincourt, Sir James at
Ascalon ! ”

II.—THE CITY CLERK.

“ We were sick to death of ledger and of day book,
Bored to death in City and on 'Change ;
For us at tea-time Lyons' Peggy may look ;
We're taking tea with Prussians—at long range.

“ We'd had enough of ' footer ' and of cricket ;
But what bowling and what charges we have seen
Since we started out to keep up England's wicket
And to give and take War's passes, sharp and
clean !

“ When the air with hurtling shrapnel's all a-quiver
And the smoke of battle through the valley swirls,
It's better than our Sundays up the river,
And the rifle's hug is closer than a girl's.”

III.—THE PITMAN.

Wild elf-locks shag his swarthy brow ;
Under its thatch a sullen fire
Glow from two bloodshot balls ; and how
Those hunching shoulders scorn to tire !

The corded muscle of his neck,
The iron sinew of his arms,
The thickened ear, the nose a wreck,
Proclaim a man that ring-craft charms.

Still prompt a drunken rage to wreak
With blackguard tongue and brutal fist,
The blessings promised to the meek
Are not for him, Evangelist !

To cheer the Cup that's going North,
To coursing-match and game-cock main,
Geordies and Tykes may sally forth—
This year they'll look for him in vain.

Beneath the stars he bivouacs
On Gallic heights or Belgian plains,
Or staggers, lurching, in the tracks
Of war, now bloodier from his veins.

It is not storms of leaden rain
Or flaming batteries, belching death,
That make him gnaw his lips in pain,
Or, with a spasm, catch his breath.

The man who faced without a blench
The fire-damp's swift tornado-hell,
Sprawls, careless, in an open trench,
And whistles at the bursting shell.

Only he mutters : “ T’ gradely lass,
And t’ pretty bairns, ’tis rough on them ;
If owt amiss should come to pass,
God blast the swine ’d let ’em clem ! ”

IV.—THE POACHER.

“ In Codsall Wood no snares are laid,
Its coverts I have bid farewell,
Nor sneak through moonlight-dappled shade
In the old chase of Boscobel.

“ Last Fall I knocked the keeper out,
And did six months in Shrewsbury jail;
To-day I order him about;
I’ve got my stripe; that turned him pale.

“ My poor old shot-gun on the stairs
Grows fine and rusty, I’ll be bound;
I’m shooting bigger game than hares,
And bag a head with every round.”

V.—THE FISHER-LAD.

“ Farewell and good-bye to you, maiden of Teifi,
Farewell and good-bye to you, dear Teifi maid !
The jolly-boat’s waiting, I’m off in a jiffy,
To scouting and cruising, to chaise and to raid.

“ Ah, *cariad*, say, when you see in the offing,
Dark on the blue waters of Cardigan Bay,
Our smoke-stack just showing, then will you be
doffing
Your bonnet to wave us a parting ‘ huzzay ’ ?

“ Once homeward I’d run, tho’ the black scud was
flying,
And the breakers were howling like fiends on our
lee,
With every stitch set, every danger defying,
For, *anwyl*, I knew that you watched on the quay.

“ In vain will you watch for your fisher-lad’s skiff,
he
Is tracking the death that the foeman has laid ;
If Death is the end of it, dear maid of Teifi,
Farewell and good-bye to you, dear Teifi maid ! ”

VI.—FROM WHITECHAPEL.

A white and wolfish face, with fangs
Half-snarling out of flaccid lips;
An unkempt head, that loosely hangs;
Shoulders that cower from gaolers' grips;

Eyes furtive in their greedy glance;
Slim fingers not untaught to thief;—
He shambles forward to the chance
His whole life's squalor to retrieve.

VII.—THE SCHOLAR.

His narrow chest he will inflate,
His tell-tale spectacles discard,
Till “ Passed for Service,” soon or late,
His simple stratagem reward.

The burly sergeant, perhaps, may sniff,
His stalwart comrades laugh, and jeer
The meagre frame—what matter, if
His country calls, and he is here ?

With them, they think, he has no part ;
The lax and feeble limbs they scan ;
They cannot read the swelling heart
That makes the weakling more than man.

VIII.—THE YOUNG WIFE.

But who is this goes stealing by ?

Look once, but do not look again !

She may not brook a curious eye,

Proud, shy, half-glad, half-crazed with pain.

The hectic burns upon a cheek

With unfamiliar pallor wan ;

The smile about her lips to-seeking

Flitters a moment, and is gone.

A rosebud opened all too rathe,

Too frail for passion's reckless touch,

Her girlish beauty shows the scathe

That comes to all who feel too much.

For maiden's coy delay must fail

When lovers are so soon to part ;

Yestreen she wore the bridal veil,

To-day she bears a widowed heart.

IX.—A MOTHER OF MEN.

Gaunt and haggard, and stiff with toil
To wrest scant bread from a niggard soil,
Hatless, whatever the season be,
With coarse skirt kilted above her knee,
A grim virago, yet in her face
Lingering hints of a faded grace,
She used to slouch through the village street
With a head bowed down, no glance to meet.
The gossips at their doors would stand
And leer askance at the unringed hand.
“ There’s folk,” they tittered, “ no better than cats;
God knows the father of all those brats ! ”

But she strides to-day with head unbowed;
What is this thing that makes her proud ?
What is it makes her hard eyes shine ?
Six strong sons dead in the fighting line !
The gossips at their doors may stand;
They dare not sneer at the unringed hand.
Men mutter a prayer and raise their hats
For a shameless woman and nameless brats.
The childless wife must speak her fair,
The laggard’s mother shrink from her stare.
She scorns them now, as they scorned her then.
Mother of heroes ! Mother of men !

X

“SUNT LACRIMAE RERUM.”

The pomp in which the sun went down,
 Burning the river, shore to shore,
With splendours of his blazing crown,
 Is such I never saw before.

The peace that wraps this English lea,
 As tender Evening leans her brow
To bless the woodland sanctity,
 Is such I never felt till now.

The pathos of a sunset shore,
 The pain on Evening's tender brow,
Is such I never saw before,
 Is such I never felt till now.

XI.—THE VOICES IN THE WIND

Night's dumbness, only pin-pricked by
Staccato ticks that time my pen,
Shatters : the gale is loud and high ;
It moans, it raves, it keens—and then——

O wild, unearthly music, hush !
There are such voices in your storm
That I my very life would crush
To drown this dread in life-blood warm !

[Grateful acknowledgment is due to the Editor and Proprietors of the *Saturday Westminster Gazette* for permission to reprint the Prologue, Nos. I, V, VIII, X, and XI in this little sheaf of verses.]

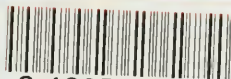
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